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Teaching Asian American History

Despite having settled in North America since at least the eighteenth century, Asians have typically been portrayed as immigrants and aliens—perpetual foreigners.

Gary Y. Okihiro

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I ask my students each year in my introductory Asian American history course to survey U.S. history textbooks to note their coverage of Asian Americans. They invariably report that Asians are largely absent from those texts, and when present they appear as the objects of America's foreign relations or domestically as victims and contributors. Among the usual suspects are U.S. expansion into the Philippines in the late-nineteenth century, the Pacific theatre of World War II, and the Korean and Vietnam wars. Notably, all of those topics position Asians in opposition to Americans as both foreigners and the enemy "over there." Despite having settled in North America since at least the eighteenth century, Asians have typically been portrayed as immigrants and aliens—perpetual foreigners.

As victims in textbooks, my students find, Asians commonly appear during discussions of nineteenth-century nativism evidenced in the anti-Chinese movement of that period, and in considerations of the Constitution and its guarantees during times of national emergency as exemplified in the World War II removal and detention of Japanese Americans along the West Coast. Typically, as contributors, Chinese men's labor in the construction of the transcontinental railroad is a favorite, along with the educational and

economic achievements of Asian immigrants since the 1960s, an idea that gave rise to the notion of Asians as America's "model minority."

I suppose the authors of U.S. history textbooks are simply reflecting the state of the field in their reliance upon secondary sources. Indeed, most books written about Asian Americans prior to the 1980s stressed those themes of diplomatic and political history that occupy much of the contents of today's textbooks. Still, I retain at least two concerns about my students' findings from their surveys of those texts. There is a remarkable and persistent disinterest in thinking about race and race relations in terms other than black and white, a mind set that is by no means limited to history textbook authors.

My other observation is that the newer, more textured and nuanced accounts of the Asian experience in America published since 1980 have yet to make an impact upon the master narratives of U.S. history. Hopefully, this special issue of the *Magazine of History* will encourage a rethinking about how historians choose to represent Asian Americans, whether absent or present, and their place within the wider American past.

I would be amiss if I failed to justify, however briefly, the inclusion of Asians in our teaching and writing of American

history. On the face of it, and because of the limitations of space in textbooks and time in classrooms, many might wonder about considering Asians when they comprise a mere three percent of America's peoples and when a majority of them have arrived in the U.S. only since the liberalizing immigration law of 1965. Including Asian Americans in our teaching and writing appears a luxury that few can afford.

For some, the changing demographics of their classrooms, where increasing numbers of Asian American students are filling the seats, might provide an incentive for including an Asian American component to their courses.

Asian American students constitute more than half of the students at several California institutions of higher learning, and they commonly represent over ten percent—and the largest minority group—of students on many campuses across the country. There is, no doubt, much to be said for the notion of educational relevance in that the curriculum should reflect, in part, the social realities and aspirations of students.

And Asian American students, along with other students who find themselves marginalized, have demanded services, including courses and administrative structures, responsive to their needs. Those forces have impelled the current, nationwide expansion of Asian American Studies.

Although important, I don't see those factors as compelling educational reasons for including the experiences of Asians in the teaching and writing of U.S. history. Rather, I think, the intellectual necessity of Asian American Studies offers a more convincing reason for its inclusion within the curriculum. I will make the case for

just the most salient aspect of the field's academic merit. Asian American Studies, indeed Ethnic Studies generally, has as its principal object of analysis race. I suppose most will agree that race is an essential unit of study, and has, in fact, comprised a dominant factor in American history. (Surely gender, class, and sexuality are equally important, and we know that these analytic categories are inextricable, but that recognition doesn't negate or diminish the significance of race.) Race within the U.S. has had a long and varied career, but certainly within our present context, race has come to mean "black," and race

reason, reality, depth, active, transcendence—male, and the body, passion, appearance, surface, passive, immanence—female. Binarisms and their correlates, accordingly, structure and maintain privilege and power.

Dualisms, however, cannot account for other positions that complicate their apparently neat and clear-cut definitions and boundaries. Indeed, the ambivalences posed by Asians (and racial others who occupy ambiguous, "middling" positions, like Latinos, American Indians, and biracials) along the borders of race threaten a "category crisis," as termed by Marjorie

Garber in her *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing & Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), in which definitional boundaries blur, borderlines become permeable, and the heretofore solid constructs of hierarchies and relations of power become destabilized, calling into question the "naturalisms" of dualisms and of the categories themselves. Asians are neither black nor

white, despite attempts to analogize them as in "like black" or "like white," or to negate them as in "nonwhite."

What I am suggesting is that the black-white binarism of race functions in the American experience to sustain white supremacy, or the power of white over black, and that the introduction of a third (or fourth or fifth) position can disrupt (as well as reinforce) the dominant discourse and alter the relations of power. I think, therefore, that the Asian racial subject is indispensable to both an understanding of race and an intervention in the politics of race. Those outcomes, if correct, are forthrightly fundamental and singularly significant.

William Speer, *The Oldest and Newest Empire: China and the United States, 1870*



Chinese merchants in San Francisco in the 1860s.

relations, "black" and "white," pivoting upon whiteness and its negation, blackness.

In her *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), philosopher Elizabeth Grosz argues that "dichotomous thinking necessarily hierarchizes and ranks the two polarized terms so that one becomes the privileged term and the other its suppressed, subordinated, negative counterpart" (p. 3). Thus, for example, white/male/heterosexual constitutes the norm against which black/female/homosexual is defined. Further, notes Grosz, dualisms like mind and body are correlated with other oppositional pairs, such that mind is

Asians, the subject matter of this *Magazine's* issue, are a diverse lot. Asians can be "racially" yellow, black, brown, and white, insofar as those colors constitute discrete phenotypes. Asians derive from West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, but also from Africa, South America, Europe, the Caribbean, Pacific Islands, and North America. Asians not only settled North America before the American Revolution, but they also came just yesterday. The political borders of the U.S. don't contain the boundaries of Asian America because the Asian American identity and position within the American social relations are regional and national but also transnational in compass. Asian American families might be fractured by geo-political alignments, but their identities, constitutive of self, kin, and society, are not necessarily limited by the divide of the nation-state. The foregoing merely hint at the boggling diversity endemic to the group essentialized as "Asian American."

The articles in this issue of the *Magazine* are arranged into three sections: an essay on historiography; five reflections on teaching and studying Asian American history; and five lesson plans. Sucheng Chan, in her sweeping review, "The Writing of Asian American History," divides Asian American historiography into four overlapping periods, beginning with partisan writings (from the 1870s to early 1920s), the period of social scientific studies (from the late 1910s to early 1960s), the revisionist period (from the 1960s to early 1980s), and a coming of age (from the early 1980s to the present). Chan observes that although considerable, the literature on Asian Americans was written mainly by non-historians, including missionaries, diplomats, journalists, polemicists, and social scientists. As a result, historians, who have become the principal architects of Asian American historiography only over the last fifteen years, have had to laboriously search for and sift through fragmentary evidence to correct biased and misinformed interpretations.

Michael Omi reflects upon the never-ending project of teaching Asian Ameri-

can history in his, "Teaching, Situating, and Interrogating Asian American History." He notes the limitations of basing chronology upon the various immigration laws that helped to determine and shape Asian American ethnic groups, and instead proposes that Asian American history must relate to the wider themes of American history, must integrate class and gender in its largely "raced" account, and must respond to the transnational character of post-1965 communities. Omi traces the evolution of his Asian American history course which he has taught for over a decade at the University of California, Berkeley, and how the shifting contexts of student composition and the university's curriculum have affected his course content. "My main intent in the course now is to situate the experience of Asian Americans within the broader historical context of race in the United States," he explains. But he adds that race is structured and in turn structures gender and class, and his course, accordingly, stresses the "intersectionality" of race, gender, and class. Looking back, Omi concludes, the changes in his course suggest that teaching Asian American history is an act of constant negotiation and creativity.

"A minority within a minority, the story of Asian American women has barely begun to be told," Sucheta Mazumdar states in her essay, "Beyond Bound Feet: Relocating Asian American Women." Mazumdar observes that the gender disparity between men and women among Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and Asian Indian in America that favored men began with Asian patriarchy and economic necessity, but men in the U.S., she insists, were linked with women in Asia. Further, by thinking of migration not in terms of gender but as the experience of workers, suggests Mazumdar, women become prominent actors in that account. Women worked in Asia and in the U.S., whether as wage workers or within the household, and the centrality of women's labor in the Asian American experience is even more pronounced during the post-1965 period, when unprecedented numbers of women have entered into wage labor.

K. Scott Wong describes a teaching method that allows students to balance scholarly inquiry with personal discovery in his, "Crossing the Borders of the Personal and the Public: Family History and the Teaching of Asian American History." He notes, like Sucheng Chan in her bibliographic essay, that the paucity of historical sources has shaped the direction of research, but, he observes, it has even affected the teaching of Asian American history. In his course at Williams College, Wong asks his students to research and write on family history and to connect that to the wider past. "In most cases," he reports, "the students have embraced this assignment with great enthusiasm." Equally satisfying have been papers from both Asian and non-Asian students, and besides the educational benefits of connecting experience with its context, the exercise allows Wong to work through with his students the notions of historical documents, their production, and their deployments. In classrooms of increasing diversity, this assignment, concludes Wong, provides a common ground and "an avenue for communication" for students, based upon "the shared experience of living as or with Asians in America."

Ji-Yeon Yuh offers a student's perspective in her, "A Graduate Student's Reflection on Studying Asian American History." A doctoral student in history at the University of Pennsylvania when there were limited opportunities in Asian American Studies on that campus, Yuh devised strategies by which to pursue her subject matter, including "to borrow shamelessly from other institutions," "to exhaust all existing resources at Penn," and "to actively work to bring Asian American Studies to Penn." Of great importance to Yuh were her links with the Korean American communities that she studied and with the Asian American Studies field at large, permitting her "to draw strength from the field as a whole rather than from only my particular institution." At the same time, Yuh recognizes that the latitude and support given to her by Penn's non-Asian Americanist mentors have allowed her to concentrate upon her choice of historical

research and specialization.

Vivian Wu Wong's essay, "Somewhere Between White and Black: The Chinese in Mississippi," explores the conundrum expressed by a Chinese American in the South, "I guess I was always considered marginal with whites and blacks." That position, as neither white nor black, Wong explains, has played a vital role in the formation of the Chinese American identity in Mississippi. "In the end," she concludes, "the Chinese in Mississippi found that it was to their benefit to reject the black community in order to be accepted however marginally by the white community. The choice has had a price."

The next five selections, presented as teaching units and lesson plans, offer a range of topics within Asian American history. The first two, by Barbara Posadas and Franklin Odo, reveal the diversity of the Asian American experience shaped in part by the particulars of its regional variations.

Barbara Posadas focuses upon Filipino Americans in Chicago during the first half of the twentieth century in her teaching unit designed for inclusion in a U.S. history survey course. Several thousand Filipinos arrived in the Chicago area before 1935 principally as students, unlike the conventional view of Filipinos, generalized from their experiences in Hawaii and the West Coast where they were typically agricultural workers. Most of those students eventually joined Chicago's working-class, a process hastened not by their marriage to Filipinas but overwhelmingly to the American-born daughters of European immigrants. Unlike in California, Washington, and Oregon where anti-miscegenation laws prohibited such unions, Filipinos didn't face that racist barrier in Illinois. Still, as workers, Chicago's Filipinos were largely relegated to service industries and were pitted against African Americans by the Pullman Company in its unsuccessful bid to break the unionization of African American porters. Their dreams of upward mobility in the Philippines, Posadas notes of those former students, were traded for "the

modest comforts of family life and American consumer society."

"Almost everyone in the United States has powerful images of Hawai'i," writes Franklin Odo in his lesson plan, "Asian Americans in Hawai'i." Those images, he states, derive from the media and from tourism. The purpose of his unit, Odo explains, is to help students develop a critical appreciation of those stereotypes and the state's cultural diversity that appear to affirm the caricature. Representations of Hawai'i taken from popular media

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and the press are subjected to close examination and scrutiny, an exercise that serves to demonstrate the turbulent complexities that lie beneath the surface calm of an apparent simplicity. The Asian American experience in Hawai'i reveals some of that complexity, such as the merits of the "melting pot," the nature of interracial relations and negotiations of ethnic identity, and the myth of the "model minority," thereby allowing an engagement with some of the larger questions that confront contemporary American society.

The remaining three lesson plans deal with particular subjects from World War

II to the present. Arthur A. Hansen, in his "The 1944 Nisei Draft at Heart Mountain, Wyoming," examines the draft and resistance to it among Japanese Americans as a way of introducing to students the changing representations of the past and how they emanate from the social relations. Besides those considerations of the objectivity question, the lesson plan allows students to connect two supposed disparate periods of the Japanese American experience (namely, the periods before and after World War II) and their place within wider U.S. history. Hansen describes the draft resistance movement of 1944 and 1945 and its representation that shifted from disloyalty, criminality, and villainy during the war to patriotism, a struggle for civil rights, and heroism beginning in the late 1980s. Both those who served in the armed forces, the Nisei soldiers, and those who refused to serve, the draft resisters, observes Hansen, "are now styled as being different yet complementary species of praiseworthy Americanism."

Hien Duc Do, in "The New Migrants from Asia," presents a study of Vietnamese in America for inclusion in discussions about trans-Pacific migrations, the Viet Nam war, and the current demographic shifts and their impacts upon U.S. race relations. "Too often," writes Do, "students are left with the impression that Viet Nam was simply a war that the United States was involved in, and not the fact that it is a country and that there are more than one million Vietnamese living in the U.S." His lesson plan, accordingly, encourages students to re-examine the Viet Nam war and its consequences, to apprehend some of the differences between immigrants and refugees, and to understand the formation and development of Vietnamese American communities and their relations with other Asian Americans and racial and ethnic minorities. Despite their relatively recent arrival, Do concludes, Vietnamese have become integral parts of the American mosaic, and their communities are simultaneously

insular cultural preserves and trans-border cultural brokers with other communities in America.

"This lesson plan is designed to help students understand the nature of Korean and African American relations in the United States," explains Edward Taehan Chang in his, "Toward Understanding Korean and African American Relations." The 1992 Los Angeles civil unrest and widely publicized boycotts of Korean stores by African Americans during the

1980s and 1990s, notes Chang, have positioned the apparent conflict between Korean and African Americans as "one of the most visible and explosive issues of urban America." Through a study of the respective histories of Korean and African Americans, Chang contrasts those realities against the pervasive myths and misconceptions that have prevailed in the media and that have influenced significantly the mutual perceptions held by Koreans and Africans about one another. Not content with an

understanding of the bases for conflict, Chang reflects upon the prospects for coalition-building between Korean and African Americans.

Decidedly a mere beginning, the essays and lesson plans in this *Magazine* reveal some of the intellectual and social benefits that derive from studying and teaching Asian American history, and will hopefully stimulate teachers and students alike to rethink the narratives and silences of American history. □

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